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PAULA C. LOWE

THE PERPETUAL MELANCHOLY OF PAULINE LARSON

Slayton, Minnesota, 1945

On the flat palm of prairie, you were born to wail
in a muffling dark of broken sod and barn stones
cobbled from the land like potatoes
peeled with a knife into a white
tin basin.

You were a blue girl inside a ring of desperate trees
circled with their backs to the northwest wind,
a daughter darning socks by a brother
whittling sticks while a blizzard
drift-locked your doors.

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Pauline, how did you carry on in that county
of perpetual melancholy, wear wool washed
in muddy water pailed from Beaver Creek,
wear stains of silt that wouldn't beat out
even as you stretched your skirts
over chokecherry?

Busted banks and world wars took and broke men
and sent them back to fields and streets of Hadley
with no wheat to feed them.

How did you lift despair in your hands and learn
to drink its tea? Marry a road maker
back from the trenches, bring up
babies in a caboose at the back
of his mule caravan?

How did you raise your only boy to let ships make him
a man, dress him in sailor whites
washed in bleach to blur
his fear sweat?

And more war? And then war in your chest,
a knife in your breast.

How did you roast your last Easter meal, carry high
a platter of ham in your swollen arms
to your son come home in uniform?
How did you live that long?